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THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EXPERIMENT IN INDIA

India's community development program, formulated in 1952 to foster the economic improvement of the basic rural village, has been transformed since 1959 into a major socio-economic experiment designed to teach self-reliance to the Indian people. The ruling Congress party hopes that the program, which now reaches two out of every three villages in at least preliminary stages, will also have the desired by-products of increased agricultural and industrial output as well as increased support for the Congress party. The overriding goal, however, is to engage the villagers directly in their own political and economic advancement.

The community development program, administered mainly by the Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation, calls for the transfer of extensive governmental powers and duties from the central and state governments to elected village councils. By providing villagers with executive, legislative, and financial authority, the government of India is giving them both the power and the means to determine for themselves the nature and rate of improvements made in their standard of living. The government obviously hopes that popular confidence will grow with economic advancement, and that the Indian peasant will be inspired to greater production in agricultural, industrial, and social fields. At the same time, the government is increasingly placing the villager in a position where blame for any failures must rest squarely on his own shoulders.

The historical development of this experiment makes it clear that it is the main effort of the Congress party to ingratiate itself with India's rural population and thereby to remain in power. The Congress party, when it came to power in 1947, faced the usual problem of how to keep the people happy and thus ensure their continued loyalty. It also had the usual two methods of keeping in touch with its constituents--through its party mechanism and through the government agencies it controlled.

By 1952, following India's first national elections, it was obvious that the rosy glow of the immediate post-independence period had worn off. Lethargy, corruption, and factionalism had crept into the party organization, and the

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disastrous food crop failure of 1951 had demonstrated that Indian production was not keeping up with the growth in demand. Grow-more-food campaigns initiated by the government had failed because they attempted to attack only one of a series of related village problems--all of which bore on the food problem. Various studies indicated that agricultural development could not be tackled in isolation.

In 1952, therefore, Congress party leaders were looking for a means of speeding up the process of economic development and removing various points of criticism. One result was a community development program formulated to improve the village community as a whole by a simultaneous attack on many aspects of village life. In the words of the First Five-Year Plan, presented to parliament on 8 December 1952, community development is a "method...to initiate a process of transformation of the social and economic life of the villages."

The community development program was launched late in 1952 with 55 projects scattered throughout India, covering 27,388 villages with a total population of 16,-400,000. Each project contained three development blocks; each block covered some 150-170 square miles and enclosed about 100 villages, or 60,000 to 70,000 people. In October 1953, the program was expanded by the creation of a series of National Extension Service blocks, in which preliminary steps were taken to prepare for subsequent full-scale development efforts.

For administrative purposes, the government established a personnel formula for each block of one block development officer for over-all administration, a number of specialists to help with agriculture, animal husbandry, cooperatives, cottage industries, rural engineering, social education, public health, and panchayats (or village councils), and 10 male and 2 female unspecialized village-level workers who maintained primary contact with the 100 villages. The job of this staff--usually some 20 to 25 persons--was to inspire and educate villagers and help them to improve their standard of living. The government also began an intensive training program to develop competent officers and workers to staff the program.

By the end of the First Five-Year Plan period in 1955/56, some 1,160 development blocks had been established, work had actually started in 988, and 80,000 staff members were on hand;

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140,147 villages with 77,500,000 people were in at least some measure covered by the development activity.

During the first years of the program, partly because of villager preference and probably partly also because of a shortage of leaders trained for more difficult projects, the program provided mainly such amenities as roads, drains, safe drinking-water facilities, community and panchayat buildings, and schools, which the villagers could largely produce with voluntary labor and at small cost, without extensive technical assistance.

Periodic evaluation teams noted advances but also returned with reports of numerous growing pains. For example, each village-level worker, with an average of 10 villages under his charge, had too much to do in too many fields. Block staff members were transferred to new blocks in the rapidly expanding program before they had time to establish themselves firmly in the villagers' confidence. People joined credit cooperatives and took artisan training for the financial reward and then lost interest. The richer rather than the poorer peasants benefited most from cooperative loans, because they alone could establish credit. Rural industrialization was moving very slowly. People liked to be given medicine and medical treatment but would not undertake sanitation and hygiene projects.

Two particularly important facts emerged from these evaluatory studies. One was that the ordinary villager still could not benefit properly from community development because he lacked the funds and facilities to start many desirable activities. The other was that most of the initiative still remained with the government and its officers. Villagers continued to look to government for ideas, plans, and funds, and were not moving to solve their own problems. Community development was still a government program, not a people's program, and was not attracting the necessary broad interest, confidence, and participation.

In the second general elections in early 1957 the Congress party--while retaining firm control in Parliament--lost the state of Kerala to the Communists, failed to win a clear majority in Orissa, and lost ground in Bombay and Uttar Pradesh. With India beginning implementation of a Second Five-Year Plan twice as big as the first and emphasizing

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unfamiliar technical development, it must have been apparent to Congress party leaders that they would have to intensify their efforts, through both the government and the party, to increase production and to retain popular support.

The year 1957 seems to be the one in which the Congress party began a major effort to restore its contacts with the grass roots and to spur economic development. Possibly the most important single contribution to this effort was the work of the Team for the Study of Community Projects and National Extension Service, published in a report dated November 1957. This team, headed by Balwantrai Mehta and dispatched under the auspices of a new Committee on Plan Projects, toured widely, studied intensively, and made far-reaching conclusions.

One of the team's most important conclusions was that the emphasis of community development should shift immediately from welfare measures to increased production to meet the country's growing needs. It recommended that priority be given to pure drinking water, agriculture and animal husbandry, cooperative activities, rural industry, and health projects in that order. Another suggestion was that the community development program should be reorganized so as to make its administration more effective. A third was to reorganize the cooperative system so that each village or group of villages would have a single multipurpose cooperative society to handle all its needs, rather than a multitude of small non-viable societies to handle individual ones. The purpose of this suggestion, repeating the findings of an All-India Rural Credit Survey Report of 1951/52, was to enable people of limited means to pool all their resources. The Mehta commission emphasized that cooperatives should be viewed not merely as credit institutions but as a means for community development, and that loans should be granted on a basis of soundness of purpose rather than the financial soundness of the borrowers. It recommended the gradual elimination of official control over the cooperative system and centralization of all rural credit in the cooperative system. Finally, it recommended that government should withdraw from most duties and responsibilities for development work at the village level and leave an elected, self-governing institution, organized at the block level, to do this work. This local body should have regular sources of income, including national and state funds as well as monies collected by itself.

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In 1957 the National Development Council, the highest planning body in India, also decided that "the development block should be treated as a unit for the purpose of planning and development, and the National Extension Service as the agency through which the resources of the government should flow to the people." On 12 January 1958 the council endorsed the Mehta report's recommendations for a decentralization of government and development activity.

In 1958 Prime Minister Nehru gave strong support to these plans for revision, commenting, "The Community Development Programme in India is far the most revolutionary thing that we have undertaken, and the results so far achieved are truly astonishing. I say this knowing full well that we have failed in many places and in many ways to do what we intended to do. It is only five and a half years ago that we started this programme, and now it is the web and woof of rural India. This is not so much because of its vast spread over hundreds of thousands of villages, but rather the new life which it has been creating and which we see bubbling up where there was stagnation and lifelessness before. In fact, we have roused new forces from the depths of India, and the question is how far we can direct them into right channels." A United Nations mission which studied the Indian community development system shortly afterwards called it "the most significant movement in Asia at the present time."

Mainly as a result of the Mehta report, the community development program was reorganized on 1 April 1958 to tighten its organization, simplify its administration, and make its work more effective. Under the new pattern, the first stage of development is the "pre-extension block," a block having only a skeleton staff to prepare the ground for more intensive activity. When ready, the block then enters Stage I of greater activity by a full staff. After a period of five years in Stage I, the block becomes a Stage II block for five years during which gains are to be consolidated and further progress made.

Also in 1958, various steps were taken to strengthen the cooperative system to make it the chief means of providing both funds and facilities for community development. Previously, cooperatives had existed mainly as a source of credit. Now they were to provide services, marketing facilities, and consumers' stores. The Third All-India Cooperative

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Congress in April, the National Conference on Community Development in May, and National Development Council decisions in November all worked to broaden the authority of cooperatives, increase their villager participation, and provide more adequate financing for village projects. At present, most government-supplied materials and facilities are available to the peasant almost exclusively through the cooperative system.

This activity was given the official stamp of approval in the controversial Resolution on the Agrarian Organizational Pattern, adopted at the 64th annual meeting of the Congress party at Nagpur in January 1959. The resolution states, "The organization of the village should be based on village panchayats and village cooperatives, both of which should have adequate powers and resources to discharge the functions allotted to them....All permanent residents of the village, whether owning land or not, should be eligible for membership in the village cooperative and should promote the welfare of its members by introducing progressive farming methods and improved techniques of cultivation, developing animal husbandry and fishery, and encouraging cottage industries. In addition to providing credit and discharging other servicing functions, it will arrange for pooling and marketing the agricultural produce of the farmers and for storage and godown facilities for them. Both the panchayat and the cooperative should be the spearheads of all developmental activities in the village and, more especially, should encourage intensive farming with a view to raising the per-acre yield of agricultural produce. The future agrarian pattern should be that of cooperative joint farming, in which the land will be pooled for joint cultivation, the farmers continuing to retain their property rights and getting a share from the net produce in proportion to their land. Further, those who actually work on the land, whether they own the land or not, will get a share in proportion to the work put in by them on the joint farm."

With the means of development already in villagers' hands as a result of the revision of the cooperatives, the government turned its full attention to the political aspect of the Nagpur resolution by arranging to hand over to the villagers enough executive and legislative authority to enable them to plan as well as implement their own development. In doing so, it was carrying out one of the directive principles of state policy embodied in

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the national Constitution of 1950, which states, "The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government." Such a program of "democratic decentralization" was first put into effect on 2 October 1959 in the state of Rajasthan. Since then, Andhra, Madras, Mysore, Punjab, Orissa, and Assam states have adopted the plan, and all other states are expected to do so by mid-1962.

Under this plan, called "Panchayati Raj," there is a basic three-tiered pattern of self-government within each state. This begins with direct election of panchayats (or councils) at the village level, then moves to an indirectly elected body at the development bloc level, and finally to another indirectly elected body at the district level, roughly equivalent to the US county. The pattern varies somewhat from state to state, but the tendency is for the intermediate council, at the block level, consisting mainly of chairmen of village councils, to have the major executive and legislative authority, while the district body, composed mostly of chairman of the block councils, has advisory authority.

The government and the Congress party place heavy emphasis on the right of these popular bodies to make their own mistakes, learning and developing confidence and self-reliance as they do so. State government officials have mainly advisory duties in connection with the panchayat system, with power to supersede decisions of the panchayats or to dismiss the panchayats themselves only when they run counter to state or national law or demonstrate complete irresponsibility.

Functions of the panchayats are to improve agriculture and animal husbandry, develop public health and maternity and child-welfare facilities, build and maintain village roads, markets, warehouses, drains, and irrigation systems, improve education facilities, organize cooperatives and voluntary labor programs, implement land reforms, and undertake all kinds of development work. Panchayats are financed through state government grants as well as by income from land revenue, taxes, and fines they are empowered to collect.

Thus, by the end of 1959, India's community development program had been transformed from one of simple economic improvement to a major socio-economic effort designed to develop

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responsibility and initiative at the lowest levels of Indian village life by placing both authority and funds in the hands of the villagers, and to maximize the role of the public in government as well as economic life. Increasingly, the development block is becoming the basic unit for planning, for development, and for Congress party politics. In attempting to reach over 300,000,000 Indian peasants, the community development program has become the largest and most unusual experiment in "grass-roots democracy" ever undertaken in the free world.

It is clear from the support given to the movement by the Congress party and the national government since 1959 that the Congress party has staked its standing on the eventual success of this experiment. If it fails to create public enthusiasm and to raise both production and the standard of living to levels satisfactory to the Indian villager, the Congress may be seriously weakened both as a government and as a political party. The question therefore arises as to whether between 1959 and 1961 the expanded and better coordinated community development program has had the economic and political impact its originators desire.

Certainly the program has full-scale government support and backing. The total cost of the program during the Second Five-Year Plan (1956-61) was more than \$532,000,000, and during the Third Plan period (1961-66) it is to be more than \$677,900,000, exclusive of other funds allotted to agriculture, irrigation, and small industry. The transformation to independent self-government at the village level is proceeding rapidly. A steadily increasing supply of materials and services as well as of authority is being funneled down to the villager through the cooperative and panchayat systems.

Despite widespread criticism leveled at it, the nine-year-old community development program can point to major accomplishments measured on an absolute scale. These achievements are noteworthy when it is recognized that the program is aimed at one of the toughest nuts any regime might have to crack--a primitive, tradition-bound peasantry, many elements of which lack communication with the outside world.

As of April 1961, some 3,110 community development blocks had been established out of a planned total of

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over 5,000 to be set up before the end of 1963. Four hundred of these blocks were started during fiscal 1960/61. A total of 368,000 out of India's 557,000 villages of less than 5,000 population, and 203,000,000 out of more than 300,000,000 rural residents had been touched to at least some degree by the development process. A steady supply of trained technical personnel is coming out of a nationwide system of schools established to provide staffs for development block jobs. These schools are being supplemented by a new series of training establishments giving instruction to secretaries and members of panchayat organizations at various levels. Between 1958 and 1959 cooperative societies of all types increased in number by 26,000 and in membership by 3,400,000. The status of the cooperative movement in 1959 and 1960 (the latest figures available) is as shown below:

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Members</u>	<u>Share capital</u>
Cooperatives, all types	284,000	248,000,000*	
Primary agric. credit soc.	182,905	11,900,000	\$780,000,000*
Non-agric. credit soc.	11,084	4,022,000*	
Service cooperatives (new)	19,500***		
(revitalized)	33,200***		
Primary marketing soc.	2,380	968,239	\$ 7,800,000*
Consumer cooperatives	6,919*		
Joint farming soc.	1,600*		
Coop. training centers	319**		
Trained personnel	537,203**		

* to 30 June 1959

** to 30 June 1960

*** to October 1960

The Reserve Bank of India and state governments are providing share capital as well as loans to the growing number of cooperatives to give them financial stability.

As of March 1961, Panchayati Raj movements in seven states covered 55,337 panchayats, 193,605 villages, and 105,678,000 people. Villagers are reported by government officials to be increasingly interested in the fact that they actually do have the powers that have been advertised and that they are free to use them without government interference. (By mid-1961, however, it was still too early to tell whether any significant new economic advances could be attributed exclusively to

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the inspiration of Panchayati Raj.) Increasingly, private welfare and voluntary organizations have been brought into cooperation with government and political party organizations to promote economic development as a coordinated team.

Individual blocks can point to a wide variety of achievements to date. These may include considerably increased agricultural production through the use of improved seed and fertilizer, planting of new forest land, reclamation of wasteland, establishment of primary health centers, veterinary and stock breeding centers, adult education and women's and children's welfare centers, expanded supplies of drinking water and irrigation water, development of credit and service cooperatives and storehouses, and the establishment of small industries such as weaving, tanning, oilpressing, bee-keeping, or rope-making. (See Table I for statistics on average block achievements in 1958/59 and 1959/60.) Even allowing for numerous well-recognized shortcomings, progress is visible in all parts of the country.

(TABLE I - follows)

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When measured on a relative scale, however, the picture becomes less optimistic from the point of view of short-range political impact. It is generally agreed, for instance, that it takes about three years for a new block to get well under way, and about six years for it to show enough progress to stimulate popular enthusiasm and provide enough momentum to keep it going without outside prodding.

In these terms, only those blocks started by 1955/56 (or the end of the First Five-Year Plan) may be considered sufficiently well established to have made a major impact on the Indian people. At that time only about 1,000 blocks had been created, 140,000 of India's 557,000 villages covered, and 77,500,000 people affected. Thus, one year before the national elections of February 1962, only about one quarter of India's total rural population had actually experienced, through development work over a six-year period, major improvement of its mode of living, and only about one third of that population was incorporated into the Panchayati Raj scheme which puts people in charge of their own destinies.

Furthermore, the connection between economics and politics at the village level is somewhat tenuous. The community development program is conducted by a staff of civil servants who cannot directly play politics without raising a storm of criticism against the Congress party for misuse of its power as India's ruling party. State public relations officers do not get down to the block level, and development block personnel have no training in publicity. It is the avowed policy of all major parties not to become directly involved in politics at the village panchayat level, although the Congress party at least is trying to see to it that as many village council members and village cooperative officials as possible belong to the party. All parties consider that panchayat elections at the block and district level may be fought on a party basis. There is little overt evidence that Congress members in panchayats have adopted the party policy recommendation that they actively "sell" the community development system.

In addition, there is criticism that in those states where Panchayati Raj has come into effect, long-standing latent factionalism due to caste, religion, wealth, individual ambition, or other factors has come into the open and crystallized as a new force competing with ordinary party politics. Together with party factionalism, it threatens village unity, and in

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some villages development work actually has come to a standstill for lack of policy agreement among village factions.

Considering these factors of limited coverage, lethargy, and factionalism, it is doubtful that the Congress party can derive substantial direct benefit in the 1962 elections from its accomplishments at the village level. Over the next decade, the community development program should make more rapid progress than in the past and should go far to alter Indian rural life. After 1963, all blocks will be fully staffed, and frequent shifting of personnel will be unnecessary. Training establishments now are turning out a steady supply of graduates with a wide variety of skills--which was not the case during the first five years of the community development effort.

The ultimate success of community uplift programs depends, however, on a number of unpredictable variables, whose effect cannot be readily measured. One of these is the firmness with which the government pushes the program--a factor which may be altered by the death or retirement of Prime Minister Nehru. Another is the extent to which provincialism, linguistic agitation, and religious factionalism create unrest and thereby slow the process of economic growth. A third is the possibility that popular aspirations and demands generated by development efforts will outrun ability to satisfy them, to the detriment of Congress popularity.

Probably the greatest threat is continued population growth, which nullifies a large proportion of the gains made each year. With a net increase of more than 8,000,000 persons annually and a total population of 625,000,000 expected by 1976, development projects of all kinds will be hard put to keep ahead of growing needs. Unless birth control is tackled with the same sense of urgency as agriculture and industry, the Congress party will find it difficult to keep the Indian peasant happy.

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TABLE I
AVERAGE ACHIEVEMENTS PER DEVELOPMENT BLOCK FOR YEAR ENDING 30
SEPTEMBER

	<u>1958-59</u>	<u>1959-60</u>
<u>Agriculture</u>		
Improved seeds distributed	2,983 maunds*	3,211 maunds
Chemical fertilizer dist.	6,146 maunds	5,629 maunds
Improved implements dist.	123	139
Agricultural demonstrations	860	580
Compost pits dug	1,154	1,126
<u>Animal husbandry</u>		
Improved animals supplied	6.8	7.3
Improved birds supplied	98	102
Animals castrated	829	891
<u>Rural health and sanitation</u>		
Rural latrines constructed	58	50
First-class drains built	1,518 yds.	834 yds.
Village lanes paved	801 sq. yds.	758 sq. yds.
Drinking water wells dug	16	15
Drinking water wells renovated	20.8	17.6
<u>Social education</u>		
Adult literacy centers started	13.8	13.3
Adults made literate	387	314
Reading rooms opened	7	6.3
Youth & farmers clubs started	18	17.8
(no. of members)	290	294
Village leader camps held	15	11.9
(leaders trained)	491	378
<u>Women's program</u>		
Women's societies started	4.1	4.9
(membership)	75	92
Nurseries started	3	2.9
(children attending)	70	62
Women's camps held	2	1.2
(women attending)	42	29

*A maund equals 82.2 pounds
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TABLE I (Continued)

	<u>1958-59</u>	<u>1959-60</u>
<u>Communications</u>		
Fair weather roads built	7.4 miles	5.7 miles
Existing roads improved	12.1 miles	11 miles
Culverts constructed	8.7	8.6
<u>Village and small industry</u>		
Spinning wheels introduced	13.2	11.3
Brick kilns started	5.5	5.4
Bricks made	590,000	590,000
Tiles made	130,000	140,000
Sewing machines distributed	2.2	2.4
Tannery pits started	1.1	1.2
Improved ghanis introduced	0.7	0.6
Beehives introduced	7.6	9.2
Improved tools distributed (Value)	300 rupees	300 rupees
<u>General</u>		
Block development committee meetings	6.6	6.4

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